

Expansion of treatment court sought for outstate Minn. veterans

by [Jessica Mador](#), Minnesota Public Radio

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Two years after Hennepin County launched a Veterans Treatment Court, more than 100 veterans have avoided jail time and gotten the help they needed. The Minneapolis court has become a model -- and now, advocates say something like it is needed outside the metro area to help veterans there.

Marine combat veteran Seth Kroll is one of the veterans helped by the court. Relaxing on a folding chair outside his apartment building in Willmar recently, he reflected on his long journey back to civilian life.

"It feels weird to be out. It's kind of nice," he said.

The 28-year-old was sentenced last year to six months of work release jail time, followed by another six months' electronic home monitoring. This was his penalty for slashing another veteran with a steak knife at a Bloomington VFW.

He was drunk, and was offended by something the man said. The slashing severed two tendons in the man's hand, requiring surgery.

Kroll doesn't remember much about that night. But he does remember his mental state at the time.

He had been struggling with symptoms of PTSD and traumatic brain injury stemming from his two tours in Iraq between 2003 and 2005. His heavy drinking helped quiet his anger and constant memories of combat.

"I thought it helped," Kroll said. "You know, I'd fall asleep, I didn't dream, I felt more relaxed. It felt like I could shut my mind off like, hey, I'm good, I can deal with the world around me. Truthfully, it was cutting me off from being able to control what my thoughts were wanting me to do."

Kroll's Marine Corps division was one of the first units into Iraq at the start of the U.S. invasion nearly 10 years ago. His unit was involved in some of the most violent battles of the war.

Kroll survived multiple attacks, including a huge IED explosion that injured him and his fellow soldiers and destroyed his armored vehicle.

"It hit just to the right of me under the front tire," he said, "and it blasted up all the floor boards, and I couldn't feel my legs. I didn't realize it right away."

The incident affected his mental and physical health.

"All I know is I got a wicked headache that lasts all the damn time and I forget a lot of things now, like short-term things," Kroll said. "I cannot remember somebody's name. I'm pretty bad about that, and I forget what I'm talking about a lot of the times."

Kroll returned to Minnesota after getting out of the Marines in 2006 and had trouble adjusting.

His undiagnosed PTSD and brain injury took a toll on his personal relationships. He had trouble keeping a steady job. He was suicidal and put a gun to his head.

Things got so bad that Kroll actually gave up on civilian life and enlisted with the Minnesota National Guard in hopes of deploying overseas again. Instead, his drinking and isolation spiralled downward, leading to the night at the VFW.

Because the incident happened in Bloomington, Kroll was eligible to have his case handled by the Hennepin County Veterans Treatment Court in downtown Minneapolis.

The problem is that Kroll lives in Willmar.

So even though his case was accepted into veterans court, he couldn't take advantage of it. Court officials felt the long distance to and from court would make it impossible for him to participate. So Kroll's probation was transferred to the Willmar area, where he is completing his sentence.

He can't help but think he might have gotten better sooner if there had been a veterans court in the Willmar area when he first started having trouble.

"If there would've been something in place where they would've said OK, we are going to go through this with you," he said. "These are the steps we want you to take. We want you to seek help at the VA and we'll monitor you and make sure you do these things because we believe it'll help you in the future so you don't make these mistakes again."

Kroll's situation is all too common for the more than 188,000 veterans who live in outstate Minnesota.

At a recent event for homeless veterans at Fort Snelling, 1st Judicial District Judge Kathryn Messerich said veterans in rural areas easily fall through the cracks. And many of them have lost their driver's licenses after getting DUIs.

"I think it's much harder to serve them because they have to travel for services," Messerich said, "and many of the folks that we see are far away from treatment centers, and they don't have driver's licenses, and there is no transportation to get them to where they need to be. And sometimes just that barrier is enough to prevent them from accessing services."

Messerich would like to have a formalized veterans court in her southeastern Minnesota district, which covers seven counties. But until there's money for it, she uses techniques from the Hennepin County veterans court to try and help the veterans she deals with.

She starts by asking if defendants have been in the military. That way, she can begin connecting them with services to try and address any underlying issues that may be contributing to their criminal behavior.

She's not alone. Judges from around the state make regular visits to observe veterans court and share tips.

Hennepin County Judge Charles Porter says in his court, the only one of its kind in the state, veterans get the chance at a reduced sentence or other resolution in exchange for agreeing to a strict treatment program. "We want them to see their probation officers weekly; we want them to be in whatever treatment program we pick for them and we make them go. If they've got chemical or alcohol issues we want them to do support groups of some sort, usually AA but also others. We want them to see their treatment provider at the VA on a regular basis. We expect them to come to court sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly."

To participate, veterans must live in Hennepin County, or committed a crime there. The court is voluntary. If defendants don't follow the program outlined for them by court staff, they face returning to the regular criminal justice system or jail.

Nearly half the veterans accepted to the court are homeless or living in unstable housing. Most suffer from serious mental illness or chemical dependency. Many are Vietnam-era veterans who have cycled through the criminal justice system for decades with untreated problems.

The problem of veterans in the criminal justice system is national. At least 9 percent of U.S. jail and prison inmates are veterans, according to data from the U.S. Department of Justice, and this number is considered an undercount. A recent study by the RAND Corp. found that more than a third of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from traumatic brain injury or PTSD. Less than half have gotten treatment.

In the case of Kroll in Willmar, he wanted help. His attorney helped him get into an inpatient alcohol and PTSD treatment program in St. Cloud.

Kroll's attorney, Brock Hunter, is also a veteran.

He says the future will look a lot like the past for today's returning veterans if more of them cannot access the kind of help that's available through the Hennepin County veterans court.

"Without a doubt it's going to be getting worse for the next three to five years," Hunter said. "How long it persists and whether we are still struggling and dealing with our current generation of veterans 20, 30, 40 years down the road like we are with many Vietnam veterans, even today, is going to depend on our response and whether we learned lessons from mistakes that we've made with past generations of veterans and do a better job this time around."

His client Kroll has been sober for a year and a half now. He's working for an excavation company in Willmar and has a new girlfriend. He's in college studying to become a teacher.

Kroll says ongoing counseling and medication are helping, but he still struggles every day with symptoms related to PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

Despite that, Kroll doesn't regret serving in Iraq.

"I don't get angry about that. I feel sad sometimes that I think I'm a little worse for wear than I should be," he said, "but I would give up a lot more for my country than what I have now so I would never take that back."



Seth Kroll, 28, tries to start a skid steer at Chad Monson Excavating in Willmar, Minn., on Aug. 3, 2012. Kroll, a former Marine and National Guard soldier, recently served jail time on a work release program and home monitoring for an assault he committed on a fellow Guard member last year. (MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson)



Seth Kroll, left, chats with co-worker Preston Dilley at Chad Monson Excavating in Willmar, Minn., on Aug. 3, 2012. Kroll participated in Veterans Treatment Court in Hennepin County after being sentenced for an assault he committed last year. He recently finished his probation period. (MPR



Seth Kroll, 28, pauses at work at Chad Monson Excavating in Willmar, Minn., on Aug. 3, 2012. Kroll, a former Marine who served in the Iraq war, said he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. (MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson)



With his dog under his arm, Seth Kroll, 28, unloads his car at his apartment after a day of work in Willmar, Minn., on Aug. 3, 2012. After years of drinking and violence, Kroll, a former Marine and National Guard member, is trying to turn his life around. He is seeking help for the stress in his life, and attending college in hopes of becoming a geography teacher. (MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson)



Seth Kroll at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in California in 2003 between his two deployments. (Photo courtesy of Seth Kroll)



Seth Kroll escaped his light-armed vehicle after running over an improvised explosive device during his second deployment to Iraq in 2004. Kroll said he suffered traumatic brain injury from the blast, which causes headaches and memory loss for him today. (Photo courtesy of Seth Kroll)



Seth Kroll, center, and other members of Delta Company, 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, gathered for a Christmas dinner during Kroll's second deployment to Iraq in 2004. (Photo courtesy of Seth Kroll)